By Jim Caroll

Getting Back To The Basics

While technology has changed the way we do sales today, the fundamentals have stayed the same.

Soon after the horrific events of September 11, 2001, as people struggled to get back to work and return some sense of normalcy to their lives, the drumbeat of technology hype once again began in earnest.

Pundits declared that with a huge reduction in travel on the horizon for the foreseeable future, we would see massive growth in technology-based methods of communication. They declared that in the future, most people would "attend" corporate events or meetings via a videoconference. Sales deals would be closed more frequently via telephone and e mail.

Well, there is no doubt that our use of e-mail, telephone and even online video has increased since the attacks. But I shudder every time I hear one of the "experts" suggest we are about to see a lot less human-contact in the world of work, particularly when it comes to the sales process.

What foolishness!

I often find myself thinking that many of the predictions that are made about technology are way off base. Particularly those that involve sales professionals, for the simple reason that the sales process always has been, and will continue to be, a process driven by human contact.

I can imagine the frustration of many sales professionals after September 11, when hearing that many major organizations had put a travel ban in place.I could imagine them, sitting in their offices, twiddling their thumbs, and practically screaming that they had to get out and see the customer!

Sure, telephones, e-mail and videoconferencing have their place in the way that sales professionals interact with the customer, but in the vast majority of industries, it's human contact that drives the sale. The process of closing a sale is one that is often based upon discussion, presentation, a careful thrust-and-parry between sales executive and customer. In many situations, the sale occurs over many get-togethers over a period of days or weeks, and in the case of big-ticket items, several months or even years. It occurs over lunches or dinner, short meetings, and countless other types of direct interaction.

And that's a fact that doesn't disappear with September 11. Sure, things have become more complicated, but it doesn't mean that the very nature of the human condition changes. That's why when it comes to technology, many predictions that are made about the future have to be taken with a grain of salt. It's not like those who have predicted the impact of technology in the past have a good track record.

Indeed, throughout time, pundits and "experts" have always been eager to suggest that some new technology "thing" would replace something else. Consider, for example, television. When it came along, experts suggested this would kill the radio industry - after all, who would want to simply listen when they could watch? When the VCR appeared on the scene, it was pronounced with all certainty that this would result in the death of the local movie theatre. And when the Internet emerged it was pronounced that it would replace newspapers, magazines, and just about everything else!

All of which failed to happen. The lesson is this — new things don't replace something else. They simply become a part of a more complex world.

And that's the case with communications technology and the sales professional. We've been through many an iteration of prognostications that suggest that the era of the "the death of the salesman" is imminent.

Remember "disintermediation?" The Internet would lead to a friction free market that wouldn't requite the complicated and expensive services of a salesforce. Oops! That turned out to be wrong in many industries (although it has happened in some, such as travel.)

Then there was B2B. It was suggested that overnight, companies would transform their purchasing operations to smooth, effortless e-marketplaces, a world which would see the vast majority of corprate goods being bought and sold online in some type of sophisticated technology-based trading house. We wouldn't need salespeople-we'd need great big computer networks. Oops! Somebody forgot to tell the millions of purchasing managers about B2B! These are folks who have built up decades-worth of personal relationships that used to drive the corporate purchasing process. They have an instinctive and uncanny ability to understand where to get the best bang for the buck for the complex purchasing needs of their organizations, and they aren't about to be replaced by some new fangled type of purchasing process. Heck, they might not even support an initiative without a lot of convincing. Sure, B2B will play a role, but it will be a long time coming.

And so it is with videoconferencing and communications — it will take a lot of time before their role is accepted, and even then, they won't replace regular contact.

Give me two sales professionals. Lock one in the room with all the hi-tech gear we can throw at them. Send the other out to see the customer. And I'll guarantee you that 9.9 times out of 10, the latter one will win the deal.

To think that sales professionals are going to sit in their office and twiddle their thumbs and click their computer mice in order to close deals — that just isn't going to happen.

Sure, technology has come to play a big role in supporting the sales process, and it will continue to do so. We're arming the salesforce of the future with powerful CRM tools that provide deep insight into the customer, in order to enhance their potential of a sale. We've outfitted them with a variety of technologies that will allow the sales executive on the road to constantly be in touch, and instantly grab the critical information that they need. We're putting in place intelligence systems that will help to guide where our salespeople should be focusing their efforts. All those efforts will continue, and then some.

But at the end of the day, we're still going to have to send them out on the road. To suggest otherwise is, to me at least, ludicrous.

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